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Final Report, May 27, 2014
Jeremy A. Murray, Assistant Professor, History Department
HIST 395: Pilgrims, Nomads, and Bandits on the Silk Roads: Cultural Encounters in
Premodern Global History
Summer 2013 Innovative Course Development Grant
Taught Winter 2014

Course Abstract

This course explores the premodern political, economic, and cultural interactions along the Silk Roads – the trade and travel routes that connected the eastern and western extremes of the Eurasian landmass, Africa, and the wider maritime world. The syllabus includes secondary studies and primary documents in translation from early Greeks and Romans, Buddhist and Islamic pilgrims' writings, journals of European and Chinese explorers, and other records of Silk Road travellers. Students in this course are challenged to reconsider the essence of cultural interactions through group projects, independent research and writing, community work, and conventional lecture and examinations, as a means to broaden our understanding of both the premodern world and the world today. We deconstructed the modernist view of the global world, and recognized the deeper connections of cultures that have bound us and divided us for centuries before Twitter, the steam engine, or Columbus.

Course Implementation

This course was a welcome challenge for me as instructor and for the ambitious group of students who took it on. We started the course reading the brand-new Oxford University Press, *The Silk Roads: A Very Short Introduction*, by James A. Millward, a brilliant and brief entrée to the challenging materials to come. We also attended the special "Traveling the Silk Road" exhibit at the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County as a group, and discussed our impressions both online and in groups (<http://www.nhm.org/site/explore-exhibits/special-exhibits/traveling-the-silk-road>). The course's Blackboard webpage containing our Discussion Forums can be accessed upon request and invitation to TRC staff and others interested. Each week we discussed a different topic, such as Millward's book, the museum exhibit, and excellent TED talk on cultural exchange, and other topics students found relevant. Students eagerly participated in this online exchange and worked hard to refine their conceptualization of the materials.

In developing the course, I knew the Millward book would be an excellent start, and I was surprised to see that Professor Millward would be in the Los Angeles area in the end of January, visiting from his home campus at Georgetown. I reached out to him and invited him to California State University, San Bernardino, and he eagerly agreed to join us. Using funds I had raised for a China lecture series, I provided him with a generous honorarium, and he was delighted to find a group of students who had read his book. His talk on the Silk Road travels of the Eurasian lute was eagerly received, and the students in my Silk Road course were thrilled to meet the celebrity author of the book they had just read, and have him personally sign their copies! This was a surprise I could not have anticipated in planning the course.

Another surprise was the occasional attendance and participation of a group of visiting Chinese scholars. Their perspectives on the Silk Roads were welcome and brought a strong inter-cultural dimension to the class. The dumpling, in its many incarnations from pirogies in Poland to raviolis in Italy to Chinese dumplings, were an important traveler of the Silk Roads, and a lesson in the phenomenon of diffusion and convergence. With this in mind, since it was near the Chinese New Year and the time when Chinese people traditionally gather as family and friends and wrap and cook huge batches of Chinese dumplings, I invited our Chinese guests to meet in a kitchen with the permission of Professor Dorothy Chen. On February 7, the visiting Chinese scholars took great pleasure in teaching my students to cook and wrap traditional Chinese dumplings. It was a joyful and delicious occasion, and a great supplementary activity to the Silk Roads course.

On the more serious academic side, the students continued to take on the challenging reading load, which now included challenging primary documents in a volume edited by Liu Xinru and a historical account of Silk Road travelers by Susan Whitfield of the International Dunhuang Project (<http://idp.bl.uk/>). The students also enjoyed a series of online lectures through Stanford University, to supplement and enrich their understanding of another hugely important Silk Road traveler, Buddhism. (https://hcbss.stanford.edu/recorded_events) These talks included one current one by Dr. Whitfield, and the students could again see the authors they were reading in action. Finally, we enjoyed reading the lively account of a walk across war-torn Afghanistan by the Scottish author, Rory Stewart. His book, *The Places in Between* is indeed an unconventional choice for a course on the historical Silk Roads, but it provided the students with an understanding of the political and military dangers involved with being at the crossroads of empire in the modern world.

Another opportunity for a special event arose when I asked Professor Javad Varzandeh from the Business School to provide a guest lecture on commodity chains. What was the Silk Road if not a crucial premodern commodity chain? Professor Varzandeh generously agreed to speak to my students about the business calculations required in a typical commodity chain, and he gave us an idea of what Silk Road merchants might have thought about as they planned to send their goods, or perhaps travel with them, along the Silk Roads. This was another unexpected but very welcome supplementary activity to our course.

Throughout the course, the students performed well on pop quizzes, exams, and papers, and they developed a very rich understanding of the premodern global world. The Eurasian landmass came into greater focus with the “places in between” becoming more familiar, and the forgotten lands of Sogdia, Bactria, Parthia, Ferghana, and others becoming common parlance of the classroom. Chinese imperial history, as well as the histories of early Persia, India, Rome, Greece, and other regions also were picked up along our Silk Road journeys. SOTEs for the course were very strong, and I was gratified to see that the students enjoyed the course and found it challenging, enriching, and beneficial. These are available upon request. I also circulated more informal note cards that the students could use to anonymously tell me what they thought of the course

at various intervals, and what they found most useful, and what they might like to see done differently. The SOTEs and these informal, anonymous surveys combine to give me many good ideas for future presentations of the course, but they also give me the vindication and sense of validation that I worked very hard for the students, earning their appreciation and enriching their experience at CSUSB.